

## **Jennifer Labs - Community Schools, Naples**

If you had asked me two months ago what the Governor's Institute of Vermont is, I would not have been able to give you a straight forward answer. I told my friends and family who asked that it is a program in a small town called Brattleboro, Vermont where kids from around the world come together to discuss global issues and learn about being a leader. Little did I know, this program would change my perspective on different issues impacting citizens all around the globe and would show me that I as an individual am capable of changing the world.

Throughout the ten-day program, all the other students and I attended workshops, listened to guest speakers, and performed activities to help us understand what it means to be an activist. For six days, we would attend an issue group each day that we had chosen on the second day. The issue group I chose was called American Politics, and in the class, we aimed to discuss the reasons for Donald Trump's election and the state of democracy in the country today. Although we became a little side tracked, taking time to debate controversial topics such as gun control and social welfare, the class taught me how to be tolerant and to be willing to listen to opinions that are different than my own. It also taught me how to be open minded when entering a debate and how to guarantee that I have a solid argument with evidence to support it. In the first few days, some of the members of the class were not willing to listen to differing opinions and openly

attacked other peoples' viewpoints, but by the end, we were able to have respectful, yet powerful debates.

One activity that we did on the first night that all of the students from Vermont had arrived was a Congress simulation. We were all split into groups and given a specific piece of legislation crafted by each of the counselors, and we had to choose whether to pass, reject, or amend the bill. The bill that my group was assigned suggested that Congress add an amendment to the Constitution to explicitly state that marriage was between a man and a woman. It offered that same-sex couples could still engage in a civil union; however, the sanctity of marriage was only allowed for a heterosexual couple. My group decided to completely scrap the bill after discussion because we decided that the whole premise of the legislation was discriminatory against people of different sexual orientations. We also did a UN Simulation where we were all assigned a country and had to defend its position on the Paris Climate Agreement. Being assigned the United States and having to defend Trump's decision to pull out of the Agreement was very difficult in the face of lots of opposition; however, it was a very fun experience and taught me a lot about the positions of many different countries on climate change.

My favorite day during the program was the Fourth of July. On July third, we all gathered in the main building and created posters with different mottos or

slogans that we felt were meaningful and wanted to share. My roommate from Ireland and I used a large piece of cardboard to create an American flag, but for all the white stripes we used strips of newspaper and we painted the stars with the colors and symbols of flags from different countries. I would not consider myself an artist by any means, but the act of painting and creating this huge poster was an insightful and creative experience. During the day of the Fourth, the whole program marched in the parade, showing off our prized artwork and chanting and singing. The experience felt exhilarating because it showed me what it is like to be a part of a rally or march. Although the only people to hear us and see our posters were the citizens of Brattleboro, it felt as though we were really spreading our message and letting our voices be heard.

The international students that I connected with the most were members of the Irish and the Spanish group. As I stated before, my roommate was a member of the Irish group, so I had the opportunity to talk to her about Ireland and really delve into her opinions about issues that both Ireland and the United States faced. Gaining this unique perspective opened my eyes to problems that I didn't even know the country of Ireland faced, such as the housing crisis. I also learned a lot about different traditions and practices of the Irish culture that I would never have known about if I hadn't met her. Even though we only lived together for about twelve days, I feel as though we connected and that I have gained a life-long friend

that I can always learn from and grow with, even if an ocean separates us. I also befriended all the members of the Spanish group, and I had a lot of fun hanging out with all of them and learning about their different experiences in many different parts of Spain. I was able to brush up on some of my Spanish skills, which provided me with a whole new experience of delving into the different cultures and accents of the different parts of Spain. I became really close with three participants from the Vermont group, who really helped me learn and grow while at the program. They were always willing to listen what I had to say, and we all taught each other to respect others' opinions. Even though they were from the same state, all of them brought very different opinions and experiences to the table, and I was happy to offer my unique perspectives as well. My friend Zoe from Vermont had actually spent the last year abroad in India, so it was interesting to hear about her travels and how they had impacted her life and her beliefs. I even had the opportunity to befriend a student from Iraq who was participating in a parallel program. I am already planning my trips to visit all of the friends that I have made, and I am constantly blown away by how intelligent and incredible all of the people I met are.

This program has significantly impacted the way I think and how I approach meeting and talking to different people. It has shown me how interesting it is to see how everyone's different experiences have shaped his or her opinions and beliefs.

It has also shown me the power that I have to be able to solve conflicts, big or small. It has inspired me to get more involved in events that occur in my community and has shown me that I can take an active role in these events and organizations. I have the power to create my own clubs and projects that will slowly but surely change the world that we live in. I have learned so much from the amazing faculty and counselors and also all of the other student participants, whether they were from Vermont, Texas, Minnesota, New York, Germany, Ireland, Spain, or even little old Naples, Florida. I am so grateful that I had the opportunity to attend the Governor's Institute, and I am very excited to go out and use what I learned to create change in my community, my country, and the world.